

We Need Transformation not a Balancing Act

Looking critically at the ANC Discussion Document

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Blade Nzimande (SACP Deputy Chairperson and ANC NWC member) and **Jeremy Cronin** (SACP Deputy General Secretary and ANC NEC member) critique the ANC discussion document. They argue that the document represents a serious back-sliding, in which the goals of transformation are forgotten in a narrow-minded pursuit of stability at all costs.

The last months of 1996 produced a number of strategic stock-taking documents from within our movement. The timing of this batch of documents was not entirely accidental. The ANC-led government was half-way through its first term in office. Two-and-a-half years of governance had seen major changes in our country, but also many difficulties, some foreseen and others unforeseen. Across our alliance there was a sense that we had accumulated an experience that needed to be reflected upon.

The strategic documents included the SACP's Central Committee discussion document, *Let us not lose sight of our strategic priorities*; the ANC Youth League's *Organisational and leadership issues in the ANC*; an ANC discussion document, *The State and Social Transformation*; and COSATU's *A Draft Programme for the Alliance*.

There are some important convergences between all of these strategic discussion papers, but there are also some noteworthy differences, especially between the *State and Social Transformation* document and all the rest. It is to this ANC document that we wish to pay some attention. But first some observations which we believe should serve as a background to our critique.

A process of broad discussion under way

The ANC's National Executive Committee's *Lekgotla*, held at the end of January this year (1997), has taken a formal resolution that the ANC, SACP and COSATU documents, referred to above, should now be actively debated and discussed within the ANC itself, in the run-up to the ANC National Conference in December this year. We obviously greatly welcome this decision.

Even before this decision, at the SACP Central Committee meeting in early December last year, comrade Thabo Mbeki, acting in his capacity as ANC Deputy President, presented the ANC discussion document to the CC. He engaged (and often agreed)

with many of the criticisms of the ANC paper that we will elaborate below. (Incidentally, while he played a role in some of its formulations, cde Mbeki is frequently, but inaccurately, labelled "the author" of the *State and Social Transformation* document.)

We mention all of these specific points to make one thing clear. While elements in the commercial media will, as always, present a debate on the ANC paper as "SACP (or COSATU) left-wing dissidence", we are, in fact, participating in a broad and necessary debate. Opinions and perspectives are not neatly delineated down organisational lines. Neither the SACP nor ANC documents are formally endorsed positions within our respective organisations. We cannot let the possibility of labelling block comradely debate.

Convergences

We do not disagree with everything contained in the *State and Social Transformation* document. Indeed, its central theme is absolutely correct. The apartheid regime cynically endeavoured to prolong its own existence by constructing a bloated, colonial and neo-colonial-type state apparatus, built on racial welfarism for whites, and on collaborative, patronage networks for some strata among the black oppressed majority. The ANC paper documents this well, and makes a real contribution to our better understanding of it. Apartheid has now left us with an unworkable, deeply indebted and thoroughly corrupt bureaucratic legacy.

We also agree that, whatever the difficulties and shortcomings of the past three years, there have been important changes in our country, and we must not be shy to claim victories. Part of our opponents' agenda is to sow demoralisation and confusion.

On a more theoretical level, we agree with the ANC discussion paper that we cannot indulge in voluntarism, the illusion that everything is possible, and that all we need is sheer will power. We are seeking to transform our country but on a national, regional and international terrain that is not of our own choosing. This requires strategic renewal and creative thinking on our part. No-one is arguing that there are easy answers.

There are, however, some key issues which we believe are handled in a very weak or problematic way in the *State and Social Transformation* paper.

The role of the new democratic state

The paper sees the role of the new democratic state as essentially "regulatory" (it uses this word a great deal). Or, put another way, it sees the new state as a mediator between different "interest groups" in society, and particularly between "capital" and "labour". For instance, in paragraph 6.1 it says:

"Labour, **just like** capital, stands at the centre of the creation of the material conditions which make it possible to continuously improve the conditions of life of the people as a whole"; and then it adds in 6.3: "This therefore has to mean that the working class together with the democratic state and capital complete the proverbial golden triangle necessary for the development and transformation of society". We have here a technician, "neutral" state, constituting the apex of a triangle, and equidistant from capital and labour.

This is a radical and curious shift from the ANC's [strategy and tactics document of 1994](#) which, capturing a very long tradition in the ANC, sees the working class as the leader of the national democratic revolution. The discussion paper perspective begs the very important question of how one reconciles the notion of a golden triangle, of both labour and capital standing equally at the centre of improving the conditions of life of the people, with the leadership of the working class and its allies over the national democratic revolution.

The discussion paper's mythical, class-less state also coincides with a very statist (or state centred) conception of the transformation tasks in front of us. Very little room is left for the active participation of other social forces. "1.1 The struggle for the social and economic transformation of the South African society **is essentially the task of replacing the Apartheid state with a democratic one.**"

There is a great deal that is profoundly troubling about this way of approaching our new democratic state, and it stands in marked contrast to the perspectives in the SACP and COSATU documents on the role of our new state. In these latter cases the state, it is argued, needs to play a much broader and more active role. These interventions call for a state that is "developmental", "active", and catalysing, as opposed to a state that is primarily regulatory in character.

Both the COSATU and SACP documents argue for a state that is actively "**aligned to a progressive/worker dominated movement** (which does not mean the South African developmental state should forego partnerships and interaction with capital)" (SACP, 4.1). At the heart of the COSATU document is an attempt to give concrete content to this alignment - COSATU proposes, and gives some detail on, a **Tripartite Alliance Reconstruction Accord**. (Incidentally, the ANC 1994 "Strategy and Tactics" document also clearly asserts the need for this kind of class alignment.)

Likewise, both the SACP and COSATU documents, and the ANC YL document, are highly critical of statist exaggerations over the last two-and-a-half years. COSATU criticises the way in which policy and implementation have been driven by individual ministries in a technocratic and atomised way. The COSATU document singles out government's macro-economic policy position, "Growth, Equity and Redistribution" (GEAR), in particular, but it sees GEAR as only one among many such examples.

The idea of harnessing the combined force of state power and mobilised mass formations is completely foreign to the ANC document, but lies at the centre of how the other papers envisage the transformation effort.

Class realities in the new SA

The ANC discussion document's slide into a technocratic, "class-neutral" approach to politics is partly based on its inability to think clearly about class realities in the new South Africa.

The document asserts that we "must ...seek to forge a democratic and equitable partnership...between labour and capital in the interest of social stability, economic progress, reconstruction and development. In the context of the South African situation, the ***tension between labour and capital demands special attention by the democratic state because it can easily be confused with...the national question.***"

Obviously, at a conceptual level, capitalist class exploitation (and that is what it is, not mere "tension") and racial oppression are not one and the same thing. However, the ANC document is not making a theoretical point in this passage, it is seeking, in practice, to isolate class struggle from the struggle to resolve the national question.

Is the document seriously asking us not to be "confused" by the suspicion that the present powers of capitalists in our country have something to do with massive colonial land dispossession, the imposition of pass laws on African workers, the outlawing of non-racial trade unions, or the racist expropriation of African, Coloured and Indian small businesses? Can we advance, deepen and defend the national democratic revolution without connecting, in practice, class and national struggles? Do the April 1994 elections simply draw a veil over past capitalist accumulation, and its present consequences? Or should we now, in the "interest of social stability", just keep quiet about such matters?

Back in 1978, comrade Thabo Mbeki wrote: "Of the bourgeois countries, South Africa is unique to the extent that profit maximisation is the overt, unhidden and principal objective of state policy, and can therefore be regarded with respect to this characteristic as an almost perfect model of capitalism cleansed of everything that is superfluous to its essential characterisation; a model which displays to all, in their true nakedness, the inner motive forces of this social system and its fundamental inter-connections." (Mbeki, "The Historical Injustice", in *Selected Writings on the Freedom Charter, 1955-1985*, ANC, 1985).

We are not sure if national oppression in South Africa can be reduced simply to an essence: capitalist exploitation, as Mbeki is arguing in 1978. But he is right that there is a deep complicity between national oppression and class exploitation. They are "confused", in reality, with each other. This is surely a much better basis for

approaching our current realities, than the perspectives articulated in *"State and Social Transformation"*.

Dealing with "capital"

Directly related to this in the ANC discussion document is the curious and confusing way in which it uses the concept "capital". It constantly slides between:

1. "capital" - meaning factors of production - financial resources, raw materials, machinery, land, etc.; and
2. "capital" - meaning capitalists, a small but powerful class of private owners of many of the above factors of production, who use this private ownership to appropriate the product of other peoples' labour.

This slide between the two ways of using the word "capital" is very transparent in paragraph 5.14: "For their part, it should be acknowledged, these private owners are driven by the requirement continuously to reproduce and increase the volume of capital [sense number one] in their hands. They do this through the generation of profit, which is a fundamental condition for the existence of capital [sense number two]."

If you confuse these two things, then you may conclude from the trite observation noted above ("Labour, **just like** capital, stands at the centre of the creation of the material conditions..."), that we will always need capitalist parasites, private exploiters, because they are an essential part of production (along with land, machinery, raw materials and labour).

But capital, in the first sense of factors of production, does not have to be owned and controlled by a small group of exploiters. Despite the still persisting power of capitalists, very significant capital resources are in state or parastatal hands in our country at this very moment. If you fail to see this, then you are never going to ask how, as a democratic state and as a liberation movement, we are going to deploy this public capital. How do we strengthen this public capital, and weaken the purely profit-driven power of the capitalist class? And what about other forms of ownership of capital - trade union investment companies, or worker co-operatives?

Because of its confused understanding of "capital", the ANC document abandons transformation of existing power realities, and confines our democratic state to a regulatory role, overseeing "labour" and "capital", helping them to co-operate. The new democratic state becomes little more than an overgrown IMSSA (the Independent Mediation Service of SA).

Removing class struggle

To talk of "capital" and "labour" simply as abstract, technical economic categories, as the discussion document tends to do, is to strip these categories of their class character. As if capital and labour were not social forces, shaped by a history of

primary accumulation and dispossession, and reproduced in an ongoing way through exploitation and oppression. The depoliticisation of capital and labour obscures the class struggle that underpins the relationship, it obscures the unequal and exploitative relationship that characterises the interaction between the two.

The way in which the paper attempts to think the relationship between the democratic state and "capital" is, as a result of the above, mystifying: "the democratic state must establish a dialectical relationship with private capital as a social partner for development and social progress. The defining element is a working and harmonious, even at times, conflictual relationship between the democratic state and capital. It is a relationship which is necessarily complex and dialectical rather than simple and linear". (para. 5.16). In plain language what does that actually mean?

We are reminded of Marx's comment in *Capital* that "In its mystical form, dialectic became the fashion in Germany, because it seemed to glorify the existing state of things." All of this "non-linear" complexity in the democratic state's "dialectical" relationship with the class of capitalists serves to disguise the fact that there is no problematising of the capitalist class, no interest in its historic origins in the super-exploitation of black workers.

The paper polemically exhorts workers not to be "economistic", not to be "infantile" or "subjectivist". But it hardly prescribes to capitalists at all. The so-called golden triangle turns out to be worse than an illusion about class neutrality. No expectations, no pressures are placed on "capital".

Role of the ANC

Given all of this, it should also hardly be surprising that the document is virtually silent about the ANC as a political movement (in and out of government). When, in paragraph 4.11.1.5 there is passing mention of popular mobilisation, this task is said to reside "within the trade unions" and also within some very vaguely specified "genuinely representative non-governmental popular organisations". The ANC does not feature!

The document occasionally mentions, in general terms, the importance of "participatory democracy" (4.11.1). But then it immediately says: "This is one of the central reasons why the democratic movement must resist the liberal concept of 'less government'". Yes, of course, we must resist the liberal concept of "less government", but how does that relate to the question of popular participation, which seemed to be the subject of discussion at this point of the paper? The document raises the question of popular mobilisation, and then, before it can complete the thought, it retreats back into the technocratic state.

The Alliance and mass democratic movement

Not only do the positions of the ANC discussion document lead to a silence on the role of the ANC as a political movement, they lead to an even greater incomprehension about the logic behind a tripartite alliance, and the need for an ANC-aligned broad mass democratic movement. If "regulating" "even-handedly" the relationship between labour and capitalists is the objective of the ANC-led state, then the ANC may as well have an alliance with Business South Africa along with COSATU. The ANC may as well relate to the Chamber of Mines or the Transvaal Agricultural Union as it would to SANCO, or SAAPAWU.

This is the logical outcome of a technocratic, statist approach that removes class struggle and, therefore, transformation from the picture. The inability of the ANC discussion document to deal effectively with these matters is also highlighted by the way in which it conceptualises the ideological and programmatic basis of the ANC and its alliance.

It tells us: "the national liberation movement has, for 70 years, contained within itself **both a national democratic and a socialist tendency**" (3.4). This suggests that socialists in South Africa are not national democrats, and national democrats cannot be socialist.

By contrast, for instance, the ANC Youth League document usefully asserts that:

"The ANC as a broad national democratic movement incorporates a number of broad ideological trends, namely:

- a nationalist/bourgeois democratic trend;
- a socialist trend;
- the mainstream national democratic trend which tends to incorporate elements of both first two trends." (ANC Youth League, "Organisational and leadership issues in the ANC" para. 10.0)

In other words, the ANC YL document correctly understands that a national democratic perspective **unites** rather than **distinguishes** the main ideological currents within the ANC-led movement.

Pragmatism without bounds

At the end of the day, the ANC discussion document has a profoundly defensive, balancing-act conception of the challenges facing us. Stability, for its own sake, starts to become the prime objective.

For instance, it tells us: "The instinct towards economism on the part of the ordinary workers [presumably the tendency of workers to make wage demands] has to be confronted through the positioning of the legitimate demands and expectations of these workers **within the wider context of the defence of the democratic gains as represented by the establishment of the democratic state.**" (para.6.10)

That we need to defend the April 1994 democratic breakthrough is absolutely correct. But, as our SACP 1995 9th Congress said in its slogan, we also have to Advance and Deepen the democratic breakthrough. The national democratic struggle is far from over. Working class struggles, and broader popular struggles, must be harnessed behind this much broader transformational effort.

At the beginning of this critique we said that we agreed with the document that we should avoid "voluntarism" - the illusion that we can simply do as we please. Obviously, there are huge constraints, massive challenges, and difficult choices to be made. But in attacking "voluntarism", the ANC discussion document seems to slide over to the flip-side of the coin - a total pragmatism.

The document quotes (coily and without direct acknowledgment) Engels' assertion that "freedom is the appreciation of necessity", but forgets that for Engels the overthrow of capitalism and the construction of socialism were a necessity that required appreciation. Engels never gave the maxim the kind of passive, balancing-act meaning that the ANC discussion document imputes to it.

Near the beginning of the document it declares its hand very transparently. It tells us that "the true test of revolutionary practice is to be found in the ability to narrow to the minimum the gap between theory and reality" (para. 1.5). No - that is, and has always been, the slogan of opportunism, of narrow pragmatism and accommodationist politics. The true test of a revolutionary practice lies in the capacity of that practice to transform reality, actually, practically, so that reality actually embodies the revolutionary ideals (equality, justice, liberty, democracy) for which one is struggling.

That we have to be practical is absolutely true. But the kind of passive, regulatory pragmatism advocated by the ANC discussion document, especially in a society beset by huge inequalities, can only serve to legitimise and entrench those inequalities. The ANC discussion document has the title: "The State and Social Transformation". Its true title should have been: "The State and Social Accommodation".

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